

# Philosophizing *Jigi* 至氣 of Donghak 東學 as an Experienced Ultimate Reality

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## Abstract

This paper explores ways of accommodating *jigi* 至氣 (lit. ultimate energy) within Korean philosophical discourse. I will argue that *jigi* was conceived on the basis of a Koreanized notion of *gi* 氣, which has its origin in the Chinese term *qi* 氣 but bears considerable difference from the Neo-Confucian framework of *liqi* 理氣 metaphysics. The following three points will be examined. First, as a new coinage referring to the ultimate reality of Donghak 東學 (lit. Eastern Learning), *jigi* straightforwardly represented an awareness of Donghak while other terms like *sangje*, *cheonju*, and *hanallim* were used as general nouns for ultimate reality, adopted in different situations according to broader contexts. Second, *jigi* was not worked out through the medium of a Neo-Confucian worldview: even though Donghak came into being in a Confucian state, Joseon 朝鮮 Korea, Donghak's proposal of seeing *gi* as ultimate reality should not be reduced to a branch of *liqi* metaphysics but rather properly be appreciated as a new worldview. Finally, a comparison of *gi* and *qi* in contemporary usage in both the Korean and Chinese languages shows that the concept of *jigi* experienced as mutual resonance is deeply rooted in the Korean language.

**Keywords:** *jigi* 至氣, ultimate reality, *gi* 氣, *qi* 氣, Donghak 東學 (Eastern Learning), Korean philosophy, Korean language

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## 1. Introduction

Donghak 東學 (lit. Eastern Learning) holds an ambivalent status in Korean philosophy.<sup>1</sup> It has often been referred to as a significant source of Korean philosophy but a full examination of its exact philosophical positions has not yet been properly conducted. From the viewpoint of Korean history, Donghak is deemed the oldest indigenous organized religion in Korea as well as one of the most important Korean modernization movements.<sup>2</sup> However, these epoch-making features of Donghak often turn out to be obstacles in understanding its philosophical positions. Indigeneity and modernity are frequently conflicting notions and thus Donghak's adherence to both concepts often seems inconsistent. Faced with this and other superficial paradoxes, one may be forgiven for quickly concluding that Donghak is merely a syncretism of Asian philosophical traditions seasoned with Korean aspirations for modernization.<sup>3</sup> For those who do hold this view, however, limiting their observations to the existing frameworks of Asian traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism frequently means that Donghak's original ideas are distorted and its significance as a novel or original school of thought is understated.

*Jigi* 至氣 (lit. ultimate energy), an essential Donghak term, is one victim of this common assumption. *Jigi* is often cited as evidence that Donghak endorsed “*qi*-monism or *gi*-monism” (*gi-ilwonnon* 氣一元論) and that Donghak was strongly influenced by Neo-Confucian metaphysics, which seeks to explain the universe in terms of *li* 理 and *qi* 氣,<sup>4</sup> namely, the

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1 Donghak is often rendered into “Eastern Learning” by splitting the word into the literal translation of each letter: “Eastern” (*dong* 東) plus “Learning” (*hak* 學). However, Donghak can be rendered into “Korean philosophy” when we consider the context of its coinage. As Kallander duly points out, Joseon Koreans used “Eastern” (*dong* 東) as a self-referential term; for example, “the eastern country” (*dongguk* 東國) meant “Joseon dynasty” in the sense of its geographical location to China (Refer to Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea*, ix).

2 Baker, “The Great Transformation: Religious Practice in Ch'öndogyo,” 449: “Korea's oldest indigenous organized religion.”

3 Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*, 203: “the first modern Korean syncretic movement.”

4 As we will see, I do not think that *gi* which Koreans have developed and *qi* in Neo-Confucian framework are the exactly same concepts, but I see “*qi*-monism” and “*gi*-monism” as interchangeable terms because people who define Donghak as *gi*-monism (*gi-irwonnon* 氣一元論) do not make a distinction between the two concepts. That is to say, they simply regard *gi-irwonnon* as a Korean pronunciation of *qi-yiyuanlun*.

universal principle and the material force.<sup>5</sup> However, the conceptualization of *jigi* does not conform to Neo-Confucian law because *jigi* embodies the ultimate in itself without presupposing a prior principle. Although *gi* 氣 is a word of Chinese origin, corresponding to *qi* 氣, *gi* is by no means a mere Korean pronunciation of the well-known Chinese philosophical term *qi*.<sup>6</sup> Rather, *gi* has metabolized in the Korean language into a far more nuanced word through a long process of assimilation and reproduction. When *jigi* was newly coined by Choe Je-u 崔濟愚 (1824–1864, a.k.a. Suun 水雲, hereafter “Suun”), the founder of Donghak, what he had in mind was not likely the concept of *qi* from the *liqi* metaphysics but most probably *gi* as it had permuted within the Korean language.

Contrary to the existing views of *jigi* as an eclectic idea drawn from such disparate sources as Neo-Confucian metaphysics and Catholic theology, I argue that the conceptualization of *jigi* is a significant move to divorce Donghak philosophical thought from both of these traditions. In the first part of this paper, I reexamine the different names used to express the ultimate reality in the Donghak Scriptures (hereafter “Scriptures”).<sup>7</sup> Based on this analysis, I argue that *cheonju* was not an exclusive term of Catholic divinity but one of several general names for the ultimate reality and that *jigi* was the very term that reveals the philosophical position of Donghak. In the second part of this essay, I compare the concept of *gi* in Donghak as experienced ultimate reality with that of *qi* in Neo-Confucian *liqi* metaphysics. I argue that the notion of *gi* as ultimate reality provides a unique stance which does not belong to any of the schools placing emphasis on *li* or *qi* in Korean Confucianism. In the last part, I show that *gi* is an entirely internalized word in the Korean language even today by comparing its usage with that of several *qi*-related terms in the Chinese language. With this, one will see that Donghak captured the characteristic of Korean spirituality by using *jigi*.

## 2. *Jigi* and Other Names for Ultimate Reality in Donghak

In order to accommodate *jigi* to philosophical discourse on its own terms, I will begin by examining the terminology surrounding the description of

5 Park Kyung Hwan, “Donghak-gwa yuhak sasang,” 82.

6 For Chinese characters, I keep the Traditional Chinese (abbr. TC) which is used in Korea. The Simplified Chinese (abbr. SC) will be shown only when the original texts or titles are published in SC. When Chinese characters are used in the Chinese context, I transcribe them with Hanyu Pinyin system (abbr. HPS). When needed I also provide Wade-Giles system (abbr. WGS) notation: for example, *qi* is shown as *ch'i* in WGS.

7 In this paper, “Donghak Scriptures” refers to the early Scriptures written by Suun, both in *hanmun* and *hangeul*, viz. *Donggyeong daejeon* and *Yongdam yusa*.

ultimate reality in the Scriptures. Donghak emerged during the transitional period from pre-modern to modern Korea, a time which was characterized by significant cultural and linguistic transformation as well as a great deal of political turmoil. Meeting the needs of the times, Suun attempted to spread his religious teaching in the vernacular language, while carrying out theoretical explanations of his views in the academic language of his contemporaries. The written systems of *hangeul* 한글 for the vernacular Korean language and *hanmun* 漢文 for the academic writings sustained two different but interrelated universes. Suun wrote the Scriptures in both *hangeul* and *hanmun* to communicate with and persuade people who belonged to the two different language communities.<sup>8</sup>

In pre-modern Korea, there was a huge gap between the spoken and written language. On the one hand, the intellectuals of Joseon Korea, who were well versed in the Chinese classical texts, wrote with Chinese ideographs using the classical Chinese style, *hanmun*, although their colloquial language would have been Korean as a matter of course. On the other hand, commoners, who would typically have been almost entirely illiterate in Chinese, spoke Korean and read and wrote (if they possessed written literacy) using the Korean alphabet system, *hangeul*.<sup>9</sup> Although Joseon Koreans might have customarily used a much larger quantity of Chinese vocabulary words than today, these borrowings were pronounced and spoken in Korean. As a result of the negotiations between speech and writing along with broad social disparities in education, the shaping and development of the Korean language in this period was complex and deeply layered. While intellectuals imported and circulated Chinese words through their reading of old and new books from China, they also coined new words with Chinese characters on the basis of the Korean spoken language and used these new Korean coinages in their *hanmun* writings. Although commoners mainly used vernacular and colloquial Korean, their vocabulary included no small amount of Chinese terms assimilated over time, even if they would have been largely ignorant of the Chinese origins of the terms they used. This knotty interplay of vocabulary words from different origins

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8 The Donghak Scriptures were written in both classical Chinese, *hanmun*, and vernacular Korean, *hangeul*. The former is entitled *Donggeong daejeon* 東經大全 (lit. Great Collection of Eastern Scriptures. Hereafter, “*DGDJ*”), the latter is *Yongdam yusa* 龍潭遺詞 (lit. Memorial Songs of Yongdam. Hereafter, “*YDYS*”). For more on the respective audiences and different purposes of these two versions of the Scriptures, see Park So Jeong, “Individual and Entirety in Donghak Thought.”

9 The Korean alphabet system, *hangeul*, was invented 1443 and released to the public in 1446. However, it was not accepted to the Joseon intellectuals as a serious tool for their philosophy. Suun used *hangeul* to define and explain the ultimate reality for the first time.

was pervasive in the usage of Korean in this period and resulted in deeply complicated layers of Korean lexicology.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1: Language Use between Joseon Koreans

	Commoners		Intellectuals
Written Language	<i>hangeul</i> 한글	↙ Loan words from Chinese Texts ←	<i>hanmun</i> 漢文
	↓ ↑	Interactions	↓ ↑
Spoken Language	Korean	→ Korean-made Chinese words ↗	Korean

Besides *jigi*, there appear three more terms for ultimate reality in the *hangeul* and *hanmun* scriptures of Donghak: *cheonju* 天主 (lit. the Lord of Heaven), *sangje* 上帝/상제 (lit. the Emperor Above), and *hanallim* 하늘님 (Heaven with honorific suffix). All three of these terms were general nouns in common currency,<sup>11</sup> whereas *jigi* was a new coinage. The origin and exact sense of the three terms were different but they tended to be used interchangeably according to what the contexts required in *hangeul* and *hanmun*. While *sangje* appears in both Scriptures, *cheonju* only appears as “天主” in the *hanmun* scripture and *hanallim* only appears as “하늘님” in the *hangeul* scripture.<sup>12</sup> *Jigi* and *gi*-related terms are widely used in both scriptures but, unlike *sangje*, their usages and implications are extensive and complex.

10 It is said that Korean lexicology has a triple structure: native Korean vocabulary (*goyu-eo* 固有語), Sino-Korean vocabulary (*hanja-eo* 漢字語), and loan words (*oerae-eo* 外來語). Loan words could be overlapped with Sino-Korean but Sino-Korean vocabulary should be dealt with independently. Due to the high word-forming ability of Chinese ideography and long-term interactions between East Asian countries, the category of Sino-Korean has come up with more complex layers: Korean coinage of Chinese character, Korean adoption of Chinese vocabulary, and more recently Sino-Japanese vocabulary.

11 Among the three terms, *hanallim* is the most significant calling due to its vernacularism, although it was not a completely new coinage.

12 Since this paper deals with the early Scriptures, I choose the transliteration of *hanallim* 하늘님. In the early Donghak Scriptures, it was pronounced as *hanallim*, although *hanullim* 한울님 became the standard term used by the Donghak followers in the early twentieth century. For more on the transition of different designations used to refer to God in pre-modern and modern Korea, see Baker, “Hananim, Hanūnim, Hanullim, and Hanöllim: The Construction of Terminology for Korean Monotheism.”

Table 2: Various Names for Ultimate Reality in the Scriptures

	<i>Sangje</i>	<i>Cheonju</i>	<i>Hanallim</i>	<i>Jigi</i> and <i>Gi</i> -related Terms
<i>Hanmun</i> 漢文 Scripture <i>Donggyeong daejeon</i> ( <i>DGDJ</i> )	上帝  2 times	天主  11 times	nil	至氣, 氣, 氣化, 五行之氣, 外有接靈之氣, 渾元之一氣, 氣接, 外有氣化, 至化至氣, 修心正氣, 道氣, 濁氣, 淑氣, 氣像, 心和氣和, 安心正氣
<i>Hangeul</i> 한글 Scripture <i>Yongdam yusa</i> ( <i>YDYS</i> )	상제  3 times	nil <sup>13</sup>	하날님  30 times	일심정기, 산기, 재기, 의기, 품기, 수심정기
Appearance	both	<i>DGDJ</i>	<i>YDYS</i>	both

Among the three names, *sangje* (*shangdi* in Chinese) is the oldest term for the ultimate reality. Pre-modern Koreans borrowed the term from the Chinese and gradually assimilated it into a common noun used in both speech and writing. Therefore, even though it was not used very frequently in either source, it appears in both Scriptures (see table 2). Whereas *sangje* was an old term which had been widely used in East Asia for a long time without a singular christener, *cheonju* (*tianzhu* in Chinese) was of a much more recent coinage, being a term first used by Jesuit missionaries in the late sixteenth century to describe their Catholic notion of God and officially sanctioned as the preferred divine name for the Catholic deity in Chinese by the Pope in the early eighteenth century. When Catholicism was first introduced to Qing China, *cheonju* was regarded as the synonym of *sangje*.<sup>14</sup> Although the official arrival of Catholicism to Joseon Korea occurred much later than it did in Qing China,<sup>15</sup> most Joseon Koreans probably understood *cheonju* as a similar concept to that of *sangje*, which had long been in use as a way of denoting the ultimate reality.

13 One possible exception is the expression of *cheonjudang* 천주당 which appears once in *YDYS*, 6.8 “*Gwonhaka*” 勸學歌. However, it was not used as the meaning of ultimate reality in Donghak but as one of callings for the church of Seohak 西學 (Western Learning).

14 When Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci’s (1552-1610) work, *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義, was published, Qing Chinese scholar, Feng Yingjing 馮應京 (1555-1606) interpreted *tianzhu* as *shangdi* in his “Introduction” (*Tianzhu shiyi xu* 天主實義序): “天主實義, 大西國利子及其鄉會友與吾中國人問答之詞也, 天主何? 上帝也.”

15 According to Baker (2002, 115), Christianity was introduced to Korea much later than China: “The first Christian missionaries in Korea were Catholic priests. A Chinese priest arrived in 1795 and lived in Korea for six years before he was executed by Korea’s then staunchly Confucian government in 1801.”

Although *sangje* and *cheonju* were introduced to Korea during different periods, both were imported Chinese names for the ultimate reality and therefore were used interchangeably in the *hanmun* scriptures. On the contrary, *hanallim* was a native word, implying the honorific designation for Heaven, viz. *hanal* (Heaven) plus *lim* (\**nim*: honorific suffix).<sup>16</sup> The common practice of an honorific suffix *nim* probably dated from the late Joseon period;<sup>17</sup> however, the practice of calling the ultimate reality *hanal* in a sense of Heaven dated back to much earlier, at latest in the middle of the Joseon dynasty.<sup>18</sup> Early on, *hanal* was a common descriptive term for the ultimate reality in vernacular Korean even before the term with an honorific suffix, *hanallim*, was regularly used in the *hangeul* scripture *YDYS*.

The significance of the *hangeul* scripture, which tried to convey the most sacred teachings in the least esteemed language, cannot be overemphasized. Through the name of *hanallim*, the common people could communicate their spiritual inspirations without the aid of the Chinese classics. Nevertheless, like *cheonju* and *sangje*, *hanallim* was also a general noun for the ultimate reality, not an exclusive name for the divinity of Donghak. Therefore, *hanallim* was also used for the Christian God in the *hangeul* scripture.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, *cheonju* and *sangje* were used for the Christian God or the ultimate reality in a general sense as well as the divinity of Donghak.<sup>20</sup> In short, all of three terms are accommodated or reclaimed terms rather than new coinages and could also be applied to the ultimate reality of other religions or teachings, whereas the term *jigi* was

16 The honorific suffix “*nim*” is voiced as “*lim*” affected by “*nal*” according to consonant assimilation. There are a variety of spellings for a term of respect for Heaven. Besides *hanullim* 한울님 and *hanallim* 하늘님, the Scriptures contain a few variants: *haneullim* 하늘님 (*hanüllim* in MCR) and *haneunim* 하늘님 (*hanūnim* in MCR). These variants are basically a matter of phonetic changes since all these terms represent undifferentiated meaning of Heaven with an honorific suffix attached. However, with the self-awareness of modern religions, more variations came into being such as *haneollim* 한얼님 (*hanöllim* in MCR) and *hananim* 하나님. As for these later differentiations, see Baker, “Hananim, Hanūnim, Hanullim, and Hanöllim: The Construction of Terminology for Korean Monotheism.”

17 See Toh Soo-hee, “Jonching jeommisa-ui saengseong baldal-e daehayo.”

18 In the first vernacular Korean novel, *Hong Gil-dong jeon* 홍길동전 (The Tale of Hong Gil-dong), written by Heo Gyun 許筠 (1569–1618), *hanal* is depicted as the divine being who “gives birth to myriad things,” “sends a general to help us,” and “save us from death.” Although *hanal* appears without an honorific suffix *nim/lim* attached, it was always followed by an honorific marker *si* 시, expressing a term of respect. The original text is available at World Digital Library, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/4166/>.

19 Refer to *YDYS*, 6.8 “*Gwonhakga*.”

20 For *Sangje*, refer to *YDYS*, 7.1 “*Dodeokga*” 道德歌; for *Cheonju*, refer to *DGDJ*, 1.5 “*Podeongmun*” 布德文 and 2.3 “*Nonhangmun*” 論學問.

applied exclusively to Donghak's revelation. *Jigi* was the only word which Suun newly and consciously coined to describe the ultimate reality, while other terms were loan words or conventional expressions. The term *jigi* once appears in the Donghak incantation, *jumun* 呪文, which Suun claimed to have received from the Ultimate through revelation,<sup>21</sup> and yet its related terms such as *gi* or *gihwa* 氣化 (*gi*-transformation) are widely used in both Scriptures. *Jigi* and these *gi*-related words deserve more attention as they directly deliver the awareness of Donghak. The concept of *jigi* seems familiar to East Asian intellectuals but the word itself never appears in the classical Chinese literature or elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the spiritual gaze on *gi* as the ultimate reality was indeed an exceptional move which is found in neither the Chinese nor the Korean Neo-Confucian tradition.

### 3. *Qi* as Material Force in the Neo-Confucianism and *Jigi* as Ultimate Reality in Donghak

As is well known, *qi* was not originally a main concept in early Confucianism but was adapted to one of a pair of concept in the *liqi* framework of Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1030-1200, a.k.a. Huian 晦庵), a leading figure of Song Neo-Confucianism, was the one who amalgamated *li* and *qi* on the basis of theories advocated by Northern Song Confucian thinkers. In the *liqi* framework, the universe is construed as the combination of *li* 理 (metaphysical principle) and *qi* 氣 (material force).<sup>23</sup> Although the emphasis shifted between *li* and *qi* according to various intellectual trends and differing interpretations of *li* and *qi* were produced in different periods and regions, the point is that the framework inherently assumes the priority of *li* over *qi*. As long as *li* is deemed as principle and *qi* as matter,<sup>24</sup> the conceptual frame cannot but suggest a set of polar opposites in which *qi* must be posterior to *li*. Above all, Neo-Confucian thought was characterized by its acceptance of *li* as the primary concept and thus Neo-Confucian thought is often identified with *lixue* 理學 or *xinglixue*

21 For more on different kinds of *jumun* and their implications, refer Park So Jeong, "Individual and Entirety in Donghak Thought", 120-126.

22 There is no single usage of *zhìqì* 至氣 in a sense of "the ultimate *qi*" in either the *Academia Sinica database* (古漢語語料庫, <http://hanji.sinica.edu.tw/>) or the *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, which defines 370,000 words.

23 Refer to Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 366.

24 It should be noted that *qi* does not merely mean material force or physical matter in Western sense but rather psycho-somatic stuff or psycho-physical force. Nevertheless, in the *liqi* framework, *qi* is a secondary category as long as it describes the phenomenal world rather than the primary principle.



性理學 (*seongnihak* in Korean).<sup>25</sup> In effect, when Song and Ming Neo-Confucians argued over whether “human nature is principle” (*xing ji li* 性即理) or “human heart/mind is principle” (*xin ji li* 心即理),<sup>26</sup> the main issue at stake was an investigation of *li*, not *qi*.

The *liqi* framework carries both descriptive and normative claims. Applied to the natural world, *li* is deemed as the primary principle behind the empirical world which is formed of *qi*, namely, “material force” or “vital force.”<sup>27</sup> Employed in the moral realm, *li* is deemed as the source of pure goodness while *qi* is frequently singled out as the potential cause of evil.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, Neo-Confucianism proposed that “the innate disposition of human beings” (*benran zhi xing* 本然之性),<sup>29</sup> directly given by *li*, is assumed to be purely good; nevertheless, “the actual human nature” (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性), endowed with *qi*, can turn bad in the process of materialization and individuation. As such, *li* was the first and foremost category used to explain both the formation of the universe and the origin of morality, while *qi* was subordinated to *li* as its pair concept. In this conceptual framework, the expression of “the ultimate *li*” (*zhili* 至理) was commonly used either as the principle of things or the principle of morality inherent in human nature,<sup>30</sup> whereas that of “the ultimate *qi*” (*zhiqi* 至氣) was never used or pursued.

The conceptual relationship between *li* and *qi* could potentially have been configured in very different ways, as can be seen in the teachings of some Confucian thinkers working before Zhu Xi established the particular *liqi* framework which was thereafter accepted as orthodoxy. For example, Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077, a.k.a. Hengqu 橫渠), a Northern Song Confucian, discussed *qi* at the cosmological level in a Confucian perspective and developed his theory of *qi* into a more comprehensive framework. Zhang proposed that all things are composed of *qi*, not only material objects and biological entities, but also sentient and intelligent beings such as people. Given that there is nothing that is not *qi*, Zhang could possibly see *qi* as the ultimate reality. If this is the case, might we suggest that the Zhang’s notion of *qi* was prior to that of *li* or speculate on the

25 As for identifying Neo-Confucianism with *lixue* 理學, refer to Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 57. As for “性理學,” refer to Kim Sung Won, “A Reconsideration of the Mutual Issuance Theory in Yi T’oegy’e’s Neo-Confucianism,” 582. The expressions “性理學” or “性理之學” were more commonly used in Joseon Korea than in China.

26 Refer to Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 430.

27 I referred to a Korean translation of the book, *Ki-no shiso* 氣の思想. See Jeon Gyeong-Jin, *Gi-ui sasang*, 624-625.

28 Refer to Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 431.

29 It is also called “*tian di zhi xing*” 天地之性.

30 Refer to *Zhu zi yulei* 朱子語類, bk. 15, “*Daxue* er” 大學二: “格物, 是物物上窮其至理”; and *Zhu zi yulei*, bk. 26, “*Lunyu* ba” 論語八: “性之未動, 既皆至理所存; 情之既發, 無非至理所著.”

possibility of a *qi*-metaphysics which does not rely on *li*? Unfortunately, it is difficult to conclude what exactly was Zhang's position on these questions. This is because that although Zhang related *qi* to *li*,<sup>31</sup> he did not explicitly theorize the notion of *li* nor describe *li* as tightly paired with *qi*. Recent studies on Zhang Zai, however, see his theory of *qi* as a prelude of Zhu Xi's *liqi* framework.<sup>32</sup> According to this position, Zhang tried to accommodate the notion of *qi* against heresies such as Daoism and Buddhism, rather than trying to establish his own *qi*-centered doctrine independent from the *liqi* framework.

Turning toward the moral and psychological realm of *qi*, one will find that *qi* is often used as a theoretical ground for the fragility of human beings. The ascription of one's moral failure to *qi*-endowment (*qizhi* 氣質) made by Song Neo-Confucians and fwas handed down to and perpetuated by Ming Neo-Confucians.<sup>33</sup> Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1489-1529, a.k.a. Yangming 陽明), a leading figure of Ming Neo-Confucianism, described the movement of *qi* to be the cause of evil: "Following the Principle of Nature is good, while perturbing the vital force is evil" (循理便是善, 動氣便是惡).<sup>34</sup> As such, the conceptual framework of *liqi* remained solid and strong throughout the period when Neo-Confucianism prevailed. Even though various arguments were advanced in opposition to Zhu Xi's philosophical scheme within Neo-Confucian philosophy over the intervening centuries, the role of *qi* was unchangingly limited to either material constituents of the universe or the potential cause of one's moral failure.

Joseon Neo-Confucians placed a very high value on Zhu Xi's philosophy and inherited the *liqi* metaphysics in which *li* played a role as both descriptive norm and normative ideal.<sup>35</sup> They even examined the theoretical tension between *li* and *qi* with further meticulous attention.<sup>36</sup> If too much emphasis is laid on the priority of *li*, then *qi* might be seen as merely passive stuff used to fill up each manifestation molded by *li*. Conversely, if too much emphasis is placed on the vitality of *qi*, then *li* might be regarded as a merely inert idea that had a purely theoretical significance. Starting with the dilemmatic argument such that *li* and *qi* are not separable (*bul sang li* 不相離; *bu xiang li* in Chinese) in actual

31 See *Zhengmeng* 正蒙, "Taihe" 太和: "天地之氣, 雖聚散攻取百塗, 然其為理也順而不妄."

32 Refer to Chung Yong-Hwan, *Jang Jae-ui cheolhak*, 32.

33 Refer to *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 99: "人之氣質, 清濁粹駁。有中人以上, 中人以下"; and *Chuanxilu* 164: "氣質不美者, 渣滓多, 障蔽厚, 不易開明。"

34 Wang Yangming, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 65. For the original text, refer to *Chuanxilu* 101: "善惡全不在物...只在汝心。循理便是善, 動氣便是惡。"

35 Refer to Walden, "Zhu Xi, the Four-Seven Debate, and Wittgenstein's Dilemma," 567.

36 As for the bipolarity of *li* and *qi* which Korean scholars assume, refer to Kim Sung Won, "A Reconsideration of the Mutual Issuance Theory in Yi T'oeogy'e's Neo-Confucianism," Table 1.

manifestation but cannot be confused in theoretical definition (*bul sang jap* 不相雜; *bu xiang za* in Chinese), Korean Neo-Confucianism expanded the conceptual tensions of *liqi* into moral and psychological issues, which is known as the Four-Seven Debate.<sup>37</sup> Although the debate was developed into various claims among different schools placing varying degrees of emphasis on *li* and *qi*, as ever, *li* was the concept used to denote the ultimate.

Where does this persistent endorsement of *li* as the ultimate basis of reality come from? Just as the notion of *qi* itself did not originate from but became acclimated to Neo-Confucian framework, the same is true of *li*. *Li* originated as a concept denoting an internal pattern beyond appearances which could be discovered or deduced through the observation of certain things and affairs. Before Neo-Confucian sanctification, *li* meant the pattern composed by observing the heaven and earth; examples given included discerning the grain of a raw jade so that the stone might be worked into a jewel, the precondition of the action of working on a jade in accordance with its grain, or the texture of an ox encountered in the course of skillful anatomy of its body, etc.<sup>38</sup> What Neo-Confucian thinkers developed on the basis of these denotations was the concept of “One principle” (*liyi* 理一) which penetrates and subsumes “many individual manifestations” (*fenshu* 分殊).<sup>39</sup> It offered Neo-Confucians a constructive way to understand the “unity in diversity” which they believed regulated all things and events without falling into Daoist or Buddhist metaphysics.<sup>40</sup>

On the contrary, Donghak did not think of *li* 理 (*ri* in Korean) as a united principle which penetrates all things and events, nor did it see *li* as purely good and *qi* as mixed. When Suun described the divinity of Donghak with the notion of *jigi*, he did not assume any principle (*li*) behind it. Rather, *jigi* conveys the immediacy of experienced ultimate reality, namely, the spirituality that we always live with and through which we can resonate with each other. Suun held that once a person realizes that they are bearing the ultimate reality within themselves, they can develop their ability of mutual resonance beyond their closed and separate self. Thus, there is no need to have the concept of *li* to guide a person by regulating and uniting all things. The divinity of Donghak is not an almighty commander nor an

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37 As for the contemporary reading of the Four-Seven Debate, refer to Ivanhoe, “The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate” and Walden, “Zhu Xi, the Four-Seven Debate, and Wittgenstein’s Dilemma.”

38 Refer to *Zhouyi* 周易, “Xici shang” 繫辭上: “仰以觀於天文。俯以察於地理”; *Zhanguo* 戰國策, bk. 5, “Qin san” 秦三: “玉未理者璞”; and *Zhuangzi* 莊子, chap. 3: “依乎天理,批大郤,導大窾”

39 Refer to *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, bk. 27, “Lunyu jiu” 論語九: “聖人未嘗言理一,多只言分殊...然後方知理本一貫。不知萬殊各有一理,而徒言理一,不知理一在何處。”

40 Refer to Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 563.

ethical principle but simply the spiritual energy through which we can be directed to fix the spiritual gaze on ourselves and sympathize with each other.

My claim is that *jigi* pronounces a new worldview which is not subsumed to the Neo-Confucian *liqi* framework. Although many people in late Joseon period challenged Neo-Confucianism under Western influence, they were not entirely free from the *liqi* framework. Those who placed an emphasis on *li* were inclined to have a religious quest for the ultimate reality,<sup>41</sup> while those who placed an emphasis on *qi* were apt to pursue practical knowledge based on the natural sciences.<sup>42</sup> The former did not really abandon the framework of *seongnihak* 性理學 but rather replaced the long-term commitment to universal principles with the normative God as the ultimate being.<sup>43</sup> The latter tried to reduce the overgrown concept of *li* to the principles of specific phenomena, but the inseparability of *li* and *qi* still remained.<sup>44</sup> None of them juxtaposed *qi* and the ultimate reality nor did they break the academic conventions which insisted that the world be described and explained on the basis of the *liqi* framework. Donghak, however, did both of these things.

#### 4. Use of *Gi* in Korean and *Qi* in Chinese

Drawing an inference from the fact that Donghak first spread its teachings about the nature of the ultimate reality in *hangeul* and that Donghak used *jigi* and *gi*-related terms broadly in both Scriptures (Table 2), we can suppose that the notion of *jigi* was related to the usage of *gi* in Korean language. As suggested, Korean Neo-Confucians' discussion of the terms *li* and *qi* was mainly conducted in written and classical Chinese style, *hanmun*, which means that they did not develop their conversation on *li* and *qi* or *ri* and *gi* in the language that they actually spoke in their everyday lives, no matter how much effort they made. For many Joseon Neo-Confucians, *gi* in vernacular Korean and *qi* in written Chinese might have been the same concept simply with different pronunciations, which is to be regulated by *li*. However, the concept of *gi* of Donghak, which was used in both the *hangeul* and *hanmun* scriptures, carried distinctly different connotations. Whether it was written *qi* in *hanmun* or *gi* in *hangeul*, what was deemed as

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41 The best example for this case would be Jeong Yak-yong 丁若鏞 (1762-1836, a.k.a. Dasan 茶山).

42 The best example for this case would be Choe Han-gi 崔漢綺 (1803-1879, a.k.a. Hyegang 惠崗).

43 To Dasan, the most advanced learning is still *Seongnihak*. Refer to his "Treatise on the Five Schools" (Ohangnon 五學論): "性理之學."

44 Refer to *Chucheungnok* 推測錄, bk. 2, "Chu-gi cheuk-ri" 推氣測理: "氣者, 充塞天地, 循環無虧, 聚散有時, 而其條理謂之理也. 氣之所敷, 理即隨有. 舉其全體而謂之氣一, 則理亦是一也, 舉其分殊而謂之氣萬, 則理亦是萬也."

the ultimate reality and much appreciated is not *li* but *gi*, a term which was in wide currency in the colloquial Korean of the time.

It is not an easy task to trace the genealogy of *gi* since the data on the living language of the time scarcely remains. However, if we look at the Korean language we have been using in the hundred and some years after the foundation of Donghak, we can get some clues to the historical Korean usage of *gi*. Again, the development of *gi* in the Korean language was based on a germinal notion of *qi* as vital energy in Chinese and its formation as such a particularly rich and flexible concept was accomplished through a long period of digestion and accretization. Interestingly, there exists a considerable divergence between the contemporary usages of Chinese *qi* and Korean *gi*. Although the Korean *gi* and the Chinese *qi* share many expressions of modern coinage in common, they still have some significant differences in the way of word selection and application. Furthermore, they are remarkably different from each other in their colloquial forms. First, the Korean *gi* is involved much more as a vital or spiritual force in noun forms, while the Chinese *qi* is mainly used to refer to material forces and beings. Second, in colloquial usage, the Korean *gi* is often something to be encouraged, roused, and revived, while the Chinese *qi* is to be suppressed, demoted, and regulated.

Let us begin with the terms in common. Many modern technical terms, translated into Asian languages under Western influence,<sup>45</sup> are used in common, terms like “air pressure” (*qiya* 氣壓 / *giap* 기압), “climate” (*qihou* 氣候 / *gihu* 기후), “air” (*kongqi* 空氣 / *gonggi* 공기), “weather conditions” (*qixiang* 氣象 / *gisang* 기상) and so on. However, some terms diverge: for example, in China all kinds of gases are expressed as *qi*-related compounds, as in “coal gas” (*meiqi* 煤氣), “oil gas” (*youqi* 油氣), “poisonous gas” (*duqi* 毒氣) and so on;<sup>46</sup> none of these are expressed in Korean using *gi*-related words, but are transliterated using the term “*gaseu*” 가스 instead. In Korean, the chemical elements are expressed with the Sino-Korean syllable *so* 소 (素), so that, for example, the term for oxygen is *sanso* 산소 (酸素), while it is expressed as a *qi*-related word, *yangqi* 氧氣, in Chinese.

When considering older terms referring to psychological states, including Japanese and Chinese neologisms, a number of *qi* and *gi* related words are common to both Chinese and Korean, like “vigor” (*gise* 기세 /

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45 It should be noted that the common usage of modern terms among Asian countries are closely related to the influence of Japanese translation in the modernization period. However, the differences of the current translations between East Asian countries are more subtle and complex because the Japanese translations were not untouched but sometime modified and altered in China and Korea.

46 A compound noun, “毒氣,” is also used in Korea but is nothing to do with poisonous gas: it reads as “*dokgi*” and means “malice or spite.”

*qishi* 氣勢), “mood or sign” (*gisaek* 기색 / *qise* 氣色), “public spirit” (*uigi* 의기/ *yiqi* 義氣), “courage” (*yonggi* 용기/ *yongqi* 勇氣) and so on. However, if one turns towards words referring to psychological and somatic states, one will find a greater variety of *gi*-words in Korean than *qi*-words in Chinese. Korean *gi*-words range from expressions for emotions, delicate states of mind, and overall psycho-somatic conditions, and these words, which are so frequently used in Koreans’ daily conversation that one cannot live without them, do not have corresponding *qi*-compounds in Chinese. For example, *saenggi* 생기 can be rendered into “vividness” in English but would be rendered as *huopo* 活潑 or *shengdong* 生動 in Chinese. If one tracks the Chinese characters behind *saenggi*, one will get *saenggi* 生氣. Yet, if one looks for *shengqi* 生氣 in a Chinese dictionary, one will find a verb phrase which has a completely different meaning: “to get angry.” Likewise, *simgi* 심기 is a very important Korean expression for an overall psycho-somatic state, but its corresponding Chinese character *simgi* 心氣 is not used in Chinese, with Chinese employing *qi*-less expressions like as *ganqing* 感情 or *qingxu* 情緒 to represent a matching concept. Neither of the very common Korean terms *giun* 기운 (氣運, vitality and/or stamina) or *gibun* 기분 (氣分, sentiment or feeling) has a *qi*-based Chinese equivalent. The former may correspond to *jingshen* 精神 and the latter to *ganjue* 感覺. If one were to assume that the Chinese characters behind the Korean words would still convey a similar meaning in Chinese, you would be rudely surprised to discover that *qiyun* 氣運 has the unexpected meaning of “gas transportation” in the Chinese vernacular, since the Chinese term *qi* is closely related to the gaseous state of matter. These examples are not exhaustive, but serve to illustrate the larger point that *gi*-words are used in Korean to refer to nuanced senses of various states of psycho-somatic self in a way that Chinese *qi*-words typically do not.

If one looks at the verb phrases which appear in daily expressions, one finds an even sharper difference between the Chinese use of *qi* and the Korean use of *gi*. Let us revisit the expression of *shengqi* 生氣, a verb phrase, consisting of *sheng* 生 (to engender, to spring up, to be born) and *qi* 氣. There is no undesirable in the word *sheng* and what does it matter is the problem is that *qi* is sprung up. The Korean equivalent of “*qi* is sprung up” would be *gi-ga salda* 기가살다 or *giun-i nada* 기운이나다. All these expressions, referring to the most desirable state of self, are used when one is full of vigor in body and in mind among contemporary Koreans. *Shengqi* is not an exceptional case. The similar expressions such as “to have *qi*” (*youqi* 有氣) or “to move *qi*” (*dongqi* 動氣) are also used when one gets angry. It is likely that *qi* in current Chinese contexts is seen as something to be suppressed or controlled.

On the contrary, *gi* in Korean is something to be encouraged, vivified, and extended. In Korean, when one is “using *gi*” (*gi-reul sseuda* 기를쓰다), it means that one exerts oneself to the utmost; the expression “*gi* is dead” (*gi-*

*ga jukda* 기가죽다) means that one is in undesirable state and so one should “encourage one’s *gi*” (*gi-reul doduda* 기를돋우다). If one says “*gi* is broken” (*gi-ga kkeokkida* 기가 꺾이다) or “blocked” (*gi-ga makhida* 기가 막히다), it means that one is in low spirits, and should consequently strive “to stretch one’s *gi*” (*gi-reul pyeoda* 기를 펴다). As such, *gi* in Korean is neither a potential source for moral failure nor an object which should be repressed but is the fundamental life force which makes us be ourselves.

In Korean usage, *gi* is not only involved in one’s internal life but also in every moment when one senses and responds to the outside world. Functioning like a suffix, *gi* is attached to many words to express a subtle moment of encountering something. For example, if one adds *gi* to “a cold” (*gamgi* 感氣 / 감기), it means “a touch of cold” or “a slight feeling of cold” (*gamgi-gi* 감기기); if one feels “an empty *gi*” (*heo-gi* 虛氣 / 허기), it means that one is hungry; if one senses “*gi* of intoxication” (*chwi-gi* 醉氣 / 취기), it means that one grows tipsy. *Gi* is also attached to native Korean words to indicate a touch or slight feeling of the thing to which it is attached, as in the following representative expressions: “*gi* of laughter” (*useum-gi* 웃음기), “*gi* of mischief” (*jangnan-gi* 장난기),<sup>47</sup> “*gi* of salt” (*sogeum-gi* 소금기), “*gi* of water” (*mul-gi* 물기), “*gi* of fire” (*bul-gi* 불기).

Judging from the examples provided thus far, it can be said that Koreans expanded the meaning of *gi* and utilized *gi* in many ways for which *qi* is not typically used in Chinese. As a result, the Korean concept of *gi* denotes both something which penetrates all the things and events surrounding us and, at the same time, a spiritual energy within us. I believe that this Koreanized notion of *gi* best explains the concept of *jigi* in Donghak. The ultimate reality posited by Donghak is not conceived of as residing in the celestial world but within us. *Jigi* is a name for spiritual energy which we cannot live without and which we can personally experience as mutual resonance. Through *gi*, we sympathize with each other and lead our lives. As I see it, the notion of *jigi* is deeply rooted in wider patterns of Korean linguistic usage in which *gi* is broadly considered something worthy of being stimulated, roused, revived, and encouraged.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

I have examined the notion of *jigi* in Donghak on the hypothesis that it suggests a new worldview which departs in significant ways from the *liqi* framework of Neo-Confucianism. The basic implication of *gi* as psychosomatic vital energy originated in early China and was gradually accommodated to Korean language use. However, while current Chinese linguistic usage

47 The origin of *jangnan* is most probably “*jak-ran*” 作亂, but *jangnan* is now Koreanized and so nothing to do with the meaning of “revolt” (*zuoluan* 作亂).

restricts the meaning of *qi* primarily to material beings, Korean language preserves the ambivalent implications of *gi* and goes further to deepen its significance by developing various *gi*-expressions. Since *gi*-related expressions are so diverse and acquire such a wide currency in contemporary Korean, I believe that a Korean could not be able to live even a day without using any *gi*-related expression. This observation sheds additional light on the investigation of Donghak as an attempt to propose a philosophical framework on the basis of the Korean language.

This study can be extended to the following two directions. First, we can apply this approach to theories of *gi* advanced by Korean philosophers. So far, they have been explained in terms of *liqi* framework and as a result they were considered as critics of *li*. That is to say, they were viewed as realists rather than idealists or relativists rather than absolutists. However, if they can be viewed as free from the framework, then we can observe the philosophical discourses on *gi* developed by Korean thinkers more closely and accurately. Second, the observation on differences between the current usage and connotations of *gi* and *qi* can be extended to other Asian countries such as Japan. It is known that Japanese includes a number of *ki* 氣-phrases and idioms, which characterize Japanese language, representing various psychological phenomena. If an extended comparison is made among East Asian languages, then we can have a better picture of how the notion of *gi* has developed in the past and the range of meanings available to it in the present.

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## 東學之終極實在“至氣”的哲學內涵

朴素晶

### 中文摘要

本文探討在韓國哲學語境下“至氣”概念的含義。“至氣”是東學即朝鮮末創立的宗教思想的核心概念。現存研究通常從理氣論的角度理解“至氣”，因而將東學看作氣一元論，成為朝鮮性理學的一個分派。但如果詳細考察“至氣”概念的產生背景及其在東學經典中的含義，我們能看出東學的“至氣”實際是脫離了理氣論框架的一種新的思想模式。將“氣”作為終極實在的名稱的用法並不符合以理為主宰原理的朝鮮性理學系統。“至氣”是與“天主”、“上帝”和“*hanallim*”一同指稱終極實在的名詞。但不同的是，“至氣”作為東學的領導人水雲崔濟愚有意命名的特殊概念，它既不是萬能的絕對存在，也不是我們應該要把握的最高原理，而是圍繞著我們、內在於我們，並因此被我們所真實體驗的終極實在之名。進一步，通過考察“氣”在當代韓國話中的廣泛運用及其表達，本文證明了“至氣”所展現的思維模式是深深扎根在韓國話中的。

**關鍵詞：**至氣，終極實在，東學，韓國哲學，韓國語